

## READING AND THE WORLD WITHIN MILTON'S PARADISE

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- RESUMO: Uma discussão da constituição do paraíso no *Paraíso Perdido* de John Milton é o objetivo principal do presente trabalho. Para entender tal paraíso e suas implicações ideológicas nesse épico do século dezessete inglês, uma análise de suas repetições estruturais de interioridade será necessária. Como consequência, temos uma emergência de formas rebeldes: origens, interpretações e releituras. Desse modo, Milton e sua assinatura textual no *Paraíso Perdido* anunciam que leitores, críticos e teóricos do pós-colonialismo estão para embarcar numa situação terapêutica de criação.
- PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poética; leitura; John Milton; pós-colonialismo; utopia.

*Paradise Lost* commences with firsts: “Say first, for Heaven hides nothing from thy view, / Nor the deep tract of Hell, say first what cause;” (Book I, p. 27-8)<sup>2</sup> the poet urges the Muse and invokes his own original predecessors, the classical epics of Homer, Hesiod, and Virgil, which also establish origins and ask about initiating causes for the created universe. *Paradise Lost* does not shy away from claiming to be a song of origins – even in its very first line the epic states about the origin of error and its attendant woes. In this respect it recalls the ritual practice of repeating and remembering creation, for the poet undertakes this bold task so that the singing of that song should entail singing the rest of the myth of origins, in some form. The whole beginning of things is invoked again to explain, through memory, the therapeutic situation of creation. In what follows I will briefly discuss the constitution of a not so artificial paradise, its structural pattern of interiority, and its rebellious forms: origins, interpretations, and re-enacted readings.

That an ambivalence is necessary to the reading experience, is indeed built into Milton's subject. The poem's own presentation of origins is not uncomplicated: *Paradise Lost* is simultaneously an alternative cosmos, that is, a man-made utopia, and an awareness of impossible utopias, since paradise is indeed lost and its recovery always just out of reach. Yet this implies tension and makes its own status explicitly problematic: the intimations of paradise in Milton's epic run short of a “real” sacred time of origins and hint on and on at the impossible original. Milton's epic may be thus said to be a heterocosm to the extent that his conception of a fictional or real-life

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<sup>2</sup> References to *Paradise Lost* will be followed by Book and line numbers (Milton, 1977).

utopia is always based on “failure” – there is no recovery, there is no where to recover to, there is no thing to recover – and this failure, or impossibility of recovering utopian origins, is in its turn embedded in another powerful discourse: Milton suggests in the epic that beginnings are to be viewed retrospectively, that they are supposed to be re-created by memory (repetition and remembrance), and that the most original narrative choice, or “real-life” utopia, will be approached “with wandering steps and slow” toward a “place of rest” and to be carried out in the most “solitary way” (Book XII, p.647-9). Ambivalent and serpentine as it may sound, paradise is not outside, it is not even located round an earthly geography, paradise is much rather inside: in the wondrous and wavering, vagrant and firm, laborious and restful, solitary and occupied body (of consciousness).

Yet, let us not rush into conclusions. The aim of this paper is to record the process of reading the epic whereas the product of this reading shall hold out to us that deferred knowledge of created beginnings. We now know all about the impossibility of recovering origins, whether generally from Derrida’s critique of Rousseau’s quest for the origin of language, in *Of Grammatology*, or more specifically from Regina Schwartz’ demonstration that nothing in Milton is ever said for the first time. Schwartz showed how many beginnings *Paradise Lost* has, and argued that Milton shows an awareness of that Derridean impossibility, in other words, that the pointing and invoking power of the sign always contains the knowledge that the world it evokes is gone (1988). Here I want rather to argue that the power of *Paradise Lost* lies in the tension it requires us to experience between remembering origins, which is much more made than found, and repeating origins, what takes us to a re-creational/recreational stance.

So long as creations are at stake, Milton’s epic, to the degree that it is incantation, is also an incantational dystopia. The heavenly realms of the epic are tainted with dispute and war, its earthly paradise smacks of failure and impossibility, and the core of the poem is but a question and a pursuit: to quell the adversary. Overall, the narrative prospect happens to be posed as a characteristically open-ended Miltonic question: “what if,” he says, “earth / Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein / Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?” (Book V, p. 564-76). So are they more like, or aren’t they? We are never told. What stands out, in a rather paradoxical and baroque way, is that heaven is no paradise, that Eden may after all be like heaven, and that these two cosmos are “thought” on earth, that is, they are man-made. This poet’s creation is a heterocosm: an alternative cosmos, a man-made world. “The heterocosm made possible the conception of fictional and real-life utopias. For if the Earthly Paradise garden was not a poet’s imitation of nature but, instead, his own independent invention, then it logically followed that human beings could independently realize the pleasant qualities of the Earthly Paradise” (Ben-Tov, 1995, p. 20). By applying the theory of the heterocosm to society in general, the utopian attempted to create an improved human condition that owed nothing to powers outside human

reason and will. But that is exactly what Milton did not do. A man-made system, like Milton's epic itself, re-appropriated the abundance and pseudo-social harmony of the garden and replaced innocence as their source. An innocence that cannot stand foreshadows the complications to come.

Another way to put this would be to recall Skeat's interesting sketch for the etymology of the word *sin*, in which he showed its kinship in the Germanic languages with the Latin *sons*, and so with Greek *eson* and Latin *sunt*, thus with the very idea of being itself (Skeat, 1909, p. 563). *To be*, then, equals *to be sinful*. We can fully experience this paradox, however, only by constructing a chimaera, an imaginary world in which *to be* and *to be sinful* are different, in which paradise is not lost. By excavating Milton's text, we shall find the same paradoxes, the same doubleness: each parcel of text we uncover contains its own opposite, a text that contradicts and points back beyond itself in a simultaneous deferral of meaning backwards and forwards. Nonetheless, "the more we invest in artificial worlds, the more our values are defined by power" (Ben-Tov, 1995, p. 57) and so, the two-sidedness of Milton's non-origin song plays about with utopia and dystopia, being and being something other than being itself. Thus, the epic escapes the reductionist view of the either-one-or-the-other relation and offers reading *qua* chimaera, that is, reading becomes an almost infinite array of possibilities. Power-relations simply border Milton's text in the same way value judgements non-exist, and still return, to the poetic voice. Again, we are dealing with the specificities of the process of writing and the act of reading: language, the epic, *logos*.

Milton's narrative about origins provokes us to explore these origins for ourselves, and so to repeat as scholars or informed readers the experience offered by the poem. Alvin Snider's *Origin and Authority in Seventeenth-Century England* explores the construction, reproduction, and dissemination of the discourse of origin in the seventeenth century, arguing that "a desire to establish the legitimacy of the present through the recovery and representation of origins figured prominently in the writing of both philosophy and epic poetry" (1994, p. 3). Both philosophy and epic poetry share a desire for originary knowledge as an alternative to error. In Snider's estimation, Milton, more specifically, seeks to secure himself against error in the search for "certain knowledge" by turning to the "validating authority of metaphysical absolutes identified with a concealed or reclaimed origin" (1994, p. 3). In a sense, Milton's use of the epic quest to uncover historical and spiritual origins can be compared to Bacon's scientific quest for knowledge<sup>3</sup>, and as such, *Paradise Lost* is "informed by the contradictions of origins, the problematic relation between a copy and its original" (Snider, 1994, p. 92). According to Snider, Milton attempts to preserve the integrity

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas Milton uses the epic genre to illuminate history and religion, Bacon seems to draw on philosophy and language to bring new light on Science.

of origins as transcendent absolutes in his epic, even though he realizes “the difficulty of locating an absolute truth outside of language” (1994, p. 92). This realization is a strong part and parcel of the epic, absolute truths cannot be located in any paradisiacal realm, nor can it be located in any experiential realm. Origins and absolute truths are, using one of the poet’s favorite and final metaphors in the epic, like gliding meteors that gather “round fast at the laborer’s heel / Homeward returning” (Book XII, p. 631-2). Like Adam and Eve before, we are to labour on the Book of Paradise.

In case this last metaphor catches the readers in their quest “looking back, all the eastern side beheld / Of Paradise” (Book XII: 641-2) and helps them in the act of reading, then we gather round Milton’s play of meaning and interpretive tradition of origin. Mindele Anne Treip’s *Allegorical Poetics and the Epic: The Renaissance Tradition to Paradise Lost* is a work of Milton scholarship written out of the conviction that “*Paradise Lost* must be considered in relation to the critical tradition from which it grew” (1994, p. 128). Treip undertakes the task of mapping a poetic and exegetic tradition of allegory spanning from Aristotle to Milton and relates these historical practices to *Paradise Lost* in a way that allegory emerges as the key for comprehending the text. Central to Treip’s argument is the view that the sixteenth-century formulation of allegory as *metafora continuata* affords the poet who works with this model a greater flexibility of imaginative expression than is conceded by interpreters who would over-emphasize either the figurative or literal aspects of allegory. Given her concern for cautioning against reductive strategies of reading allegory, it is noteworthy that Treip does not find it necessary to question whether her own commitment to the Tassonic formulation of a two-level model of allegory as an interpretive key to *Paradise Lost* may not also be considered reductive. The aesthetic coherence that such any formulation brings into the epic, regardless of its historical viability, imposes order on the generative potentialities of the text and, necessarily, places limits on their interpretation. The problem of origins, authentication, and reading is here acute, a matter for various responses that do not depend on external authority.

A deep gratitude for Milton’s work informed one of the first responses to *Paradise Lost*, “in which the reader professed that he ‘never read any thing more august, & withall more gratefull to my (too much limited) understanding’. This is from the Presbyterian Sir John Hobart (1628-83), who applauded *Paradise Lost* in two letters to his cousin in January 1667/8” (Maltzahn, 1996, p. 490). In particular, the conservative and reductive Hobart welcomes Milton’s Christian *tour de force* as a counterweight to the irreligious court culture of the days of Charles II. On the other hand, “the fullest record of the conflict between Milton’s bad political reputation and the new claims of his religious epic appears in the letters of John Beale to John Evelyn. How far should Dissent be linked with sedition?” (Maltzahn, 1996, p. 494). Toleration for Beale remained a threat, and he called even louder for control and uniformity: the example he cites is the end of *Paradise Lost*, the open republicanism

in the Nimrod passage of the twelfth Book of the second edition. "All this exemplifies what Beale terms Milton's 'old Principle': the poem's description of tyranny in history is openly anti-monarchical, and Milton's 'Plea for our Original right', as Beale terms it elsewhere, is one of the 'great faults in his *Paradyse Lost*'" (Maltzahn, 1996, p. 497). Despite what they saw as the bold republicanism of *Paradise Lost*, Beale and Hobart, with their mixed responses, were sensitive to Milton's inspirations and "to his stern view on the unreforming individual or nation ... [the former] much disliked the fearful demonology of the epic, which he saw as deriving from a punitive, Calvinist, persecutory imagination" (Maltzahn, 1996, p.497). This persecutory imagination seems to haunt the reading of those who scan *Paradise Lost* for "easy" answers to "Man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree" (Book I, p.1, 2). In Milton, the gratifying response of reading his epic is rather a conversation with the inexplicable changes of power structure.

Such conversation, almost a reading conversion, sometimes carried out by inversion, sometimes by cunning adaptation, Milton seems to demand from his audience when he makes differing narratives active again in his version of those multi-layered explanatory myths with which his Christian tradition had tried to make sense of itself. Mary Jo Kietzman's "The Fall into Conversation with Eve: Discursive Difference in *Paradise Lost*", for instance, reads the Fall as a non-existent because Milton's Eden is not a place to fall from or a state of innocence to lose, "but a social experiment—the possibility for creating a 'meet and happy conversation'" (1997, p. 55). As such, the experience of the Fall is but a failure of human conversation and, perhaps, a failure of reading God's Text. This second failure can be instanced in the insightful description of Milton's paradise, by Dayton Haskin, as "a condition of possibility for meaningful interpretive labors" (1994, p. 220) – a super-text that Adam and Eve must read and interpret in much the same way that Spenser's knights read the faery escape of pastoral land. Adam and Eve's interpretive labors in *Paradise Lost* should thus be fulfilled in God's decree that they be self-authoring: "authors to themselves in all / Both what they judge and what they choose" (Book III, p.122-3). Self-authoring is quite different from Satan's misunderstood notion of self-creation or self-begetting, for Milton creates a paradise in which failure to recognize and explore interiority is the key point to understand the Fall. Milton's epic, almost "ironically" conversing with God's Text, seems to grant power to those who venture the interiority of his text.<sup>4</sup>

The most original narrative choice in the poem has to do with, exactly, that moment, the moment of origins – self-authorship – that cannot be reached. Man's Fall had already been pre-figured when Lucifer and the dissenting angels rebelled against the fatherhood of the mighty creator. "Satan, dont la chute préfigure celle de

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<sup>4</sup> In relation to knowledge, interiority, and God, see the illuminating work of Harold Bloom on gnosis and millennium (1996).

l'homme et qui sera pour l'homme cause du péché et de la mort, est tombé parce qu'il s'est révolté, et sa révolte découle du désir orgueilleux d'auto-engendrement" (Mouchard, 1996, p. 503). "Self-begot" was Satan's cry against God's decree, at the moment when the Son was exalted to his new role, anointed and begotten. Authorial intent and sonship are liable to deconstruction in the epic:

*La filiation serait-elle devenue, en général – au coeur de la transformation de tous les rapports –, redoutable? C'est peut-être cette évidence difficile qui émane du Paradis Perdu. Et c'est par quoi la modernité littéraire serait affectée: la rituelle transmission (héroïque, agonistique) de la tâche épique risquerait, quoiqu'encore vue comme centrale, de s'y révéler impossible – ou dérisoire.* (Mouchard, 1996, p. 504)

Although Milton transformed the story of Satan's jealousy into a narrative of the very origin of the devil, the key moment of this story, the primal scene of the birth of evil, is thus eluded, as in all such narrations. It is as if Milton underline by this absence the impossibility of the questor of the (filial) beginning ever getting there.

It is common supposition that, after the Fall, *Paradise Lost* greatly subordinates the importance of external locus to the psychological and spiritual paradise within. It seems, however, that even before creation proper Milton's song of origins provided a conceptual mapping that undermined the very idea of paradise with the poet's controlled and subversive faculty of imagination. Man's Fall entails the loss of a spatial and informing contained environment and the innovation of a world which is more attenuated because language-based, historical because context-based, and typological because ever moving backward and forward for the vanishing point of origin. Reading the language of "paradise," as well as re-reading any strategic use of the hyper-canonical British text that *Paradise Lost* is, should already attempt to evade submission to (imperial) authority, and should always attempt to represent a multitude of spaces in which ambivalent and post-modern relations to authority, identity, origin, and interpretation can be articulated. Milton and the signature text of *Paradise Lost* seem to intimate that scholars, informed readers, or post-colonial critics are to embark on a therapeutic situation of creation.

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- *ABSTRACT: The discussion of the constitution of paradise in Milton's Paradise Lost is the aim of the present paper. To understand paradise and its ideological underpinnings in this seventeenth century epic, an analysis of its structural pattern of interiority is needed. As a consequence, there is an emergence of rebellious forms: origins, interpretations, and re-enacted readings. In so being, Milton and the signature*

*text of Paradise Lost intimate that scholars, informed readers, or post-colonial critics are to embark on a therapeutic situation of creation.*

- **KEYWORDS:** *Poetic theory; reading; John Milton; postcolonialism; utopia.*

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